# Adolescence on Netflix highlights toxic masculinity and the challenges facing today’s youth



The Netflix drama series Adolescence has sparked significant reflection on the complex pressures faced by teenagers today, particularly around themes of bullying, social media influence, incel culture, and toxic masculinity. The series, centred on 13-year-old Jamie, draws attention to how young people navigate these challenges amidst the evolving landscape of gender, power, and identity.

Adolescence has arrived at a crucial time, reintroducing essential conversations into public discourse surrounding the roles, behaviours, and expectations imposed on young people. It raises questions about marketable masculinity, classroom culture, victimhood, and societal progress. The series highlights that toxic masculinity is not a standalone phenomenon but is deeply interwoven with wider social issues—the hyper-sexualisation and adultification of girls, distorted beauty standards, and the shaping of masculinity through entitlement and misogyny.

A particular point of concern is the growth of incel-adjacent online cultures, popularised by figures like Andrew Tate, who promote harmful narratives, such as characterising young women as cruel or performatively rejecting boys to test their strength. As seen in Adolescence, this creates misunderstandings between genders, where boys struggle to process rejection and discomfort, while girls bear the burden of moderating their refusals. This contributes to a landscape where young people are left without adequate tools to navigate relationships and vulnerability, compounding the harmful effects of social media's emphasis on performance over genuine connection.

Jonathan Haidt, in his book The Anxious Generation, explores how childhood has been fundamentally altered by smartphones and social media, leading to increased anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal. He terms this shift "the great rewiring of childhood," a transformation that has occurred without appropriate safeguards or structures to protect young people. This reshaping affects how children form identity, process emotion, and assess risk.

Historical perspectives offer relevant insight into parenting and education in this context. Ali ibn Abi Talib RA’s counsel—to not raise children as one was raised but to consider the different times in which they live—resonates today. Recognising that past methods may not be suitable for current realities is critical for responsive and reflective leadership in families, schools, and government.

Several countries have begun implementing policy responses to social media’s impact on young people. The Netherlands has integrated media literacy into school curricula, France requires parental consent for social media use under age 15 and runs awareness campaigns about screen dependency, while South Korea provides parents with online activity summaries to foster dialogue. These initiatives represent an emerging recognition of the need to actively shape the digital environment experienced by young people.

Muslim communities face additional layers of complexity regarding masculinity. Scholars such as Khoja-Moolji argue that a colonial and postcolonial nostalgia for militarised, patriarchal masculinity is being romanticised in ways that undermine critical examination and transformation. This form of masculinity, often tied to neoliberal and patriarchal values, contrasts sharply with the Prophetic model of masculinity, which emphasises trust, humility, justice, and emotional openness.

The Prophetic example includes the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ openly expressing emotion, seeking counsel, and respecting women’s presence, demonstrating a masculinity rooted in service and relational accountability rather than dominance. Modern interpretations that conflate masculinity with external markers such as beard length or tone of voice miss the essence of these ethical and authentic traits. Contemporary misappropriations often dress patriarchal dominance in Islamic language, creating a “halalified” version of toxic masculinity that resists challenge from within communities.

In educational settings, work to redefine healthy masculinity is ongoing. For example, a Head of Sixth Form reported that within their school, toxic masculinity, while present, does not dominate the culture. This is attributed to ongoing efforts to foster dialogue, build cultural literacy, and challenge harmful assumptions. The school’s approach exemplifies how consistent modelling and relational practice—rather than one-off initiatives—shape more positive environments.

Building such cultures requires holistic engagement that begins at home, as familial interactions deeply influence children’s notions of masculinity and femininity. The everyday language, jokes, media consumption, and domestic roles that children witness inform their understanding of entitlement, authority, and emotional expression. Reflecting on whether daughters are afforded leadership opportunities at home or merely asked to acquiesce is part of this examination.

Progress depends on whether empathy and integrity or control and invulnerability are modelled to young people. Practical questions arise about whether sons see adults apologise and daughters see leadership exemplified. These shape young people’s perceptions of their own identities and rights.

Policy and school leadership must go beyond policy implementation toward embedding values of empathy, trust, and mutual respect into daily interactions. Language matters: shifting away from deficit labels such as "difficult boy" to language recognising evolving needs fosters better identity understanding.

Collaborations with youth-led platforms like Voicebox, which amplifies diverse voices through media and storytelling, and organisations like Beyond Equality, which works with boys and men on healthier masculinity models, extend efforts beyond schools to wider communities. Including student voices ensures that dialogue is relevant and accountable.

Ultimately, leadership founded on reflection rather than control shifts the basis of authority from compliance to respect. This approach is essential for genuine progress in gender relations and emotional literacy. Through deliberate, value-based practices in homes, schools, and policy, societies can cultivate cultures where masculinity is balanced by vulnerability and strength, supporting young people in fully realising their humanity.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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